

# “The only story I will ever be able to tell”: Nonsexual Erotics of Friendship in Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* and Tana French’s *The Likeness*

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This article argues that erotic yet nonsexual friendships depicted in Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992) and Tana French’s *The Likeness* (2008) may serve as a queer alternative to compulsory sexuality, amatonormativity, and coupledom. The two novels focus on close and insular groups of friends who envision their futures as utopian communities; however, their plans are derailed when some members of the groups become disloyal or decide to leave. Drawing on concepts of “friendship as a way of life” (Foucault 1997), queer temporality (Halberstam 2005), and Audre Lorde’s erotics ([1984] 2007), this article analyzes the tensions between the desire for an alternative life in a friend community and normative expectations about maturity and (re)productive life path that pull the groups apart. The article claims that the liberatory promise of these queer, erotic friendships is curtailed by the external and internal normative pressures to grow up and move on, and by the fact that these communities depend on the characters’ whiteness and economic privilege.

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The notion that one major relationship may determine the course of one’s life forever tends to be inextricably linked to romantic and sexual love. The one plot dominating contemporary western narratives about happiness assumes that romantic love is at the center of private life, expected to fulfill the emotional and physical needs of the heterosexual couple and their (usually biological)

children, while also anchoring them in the often heteronormative social institutions of marriage and parenthood as productive and reproductive members of the capitalist society (Berlant 2012, 44). Despite its ubiquity, this “love plot,” as Lauren Berlant refers to this life narrative, has been questioned from various political and theoretical positions: asexuality studies theorists underscore the variety of life experiences that do not necessarily assume the prominence of sex (Carrigan 2012; Scherrer 2008); aromantic activists call for the abolishment of romance as fundamentally hierarchical and anti-queer (yingcheng and yingtong 2018); practitioners of polyamory undermine the connection between romantic and sexual exclusivity (Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse 2006, 518); and queer scholars and activists reject reproductive futurity as a universal goal and propose a plethora of attachments, some sexual and others not so, as ways of structuring life (Berlant 2000; Edelman 2004; Muñoz 2009).

In Michel Foucault’s formulation, one crucial alternative to romantic and sexual love uniquely suited to queer lives is friendship—understood as a “way of life” (1997a). This article asks what friendship, understood as a queer way of life and as an attempt to destabilize the amatonormative life path, contributes to contemporary understandings of nonsexual erotics (Lorde [1984] 2007). Following Ela Przybylo, I refer to *nonsexual erotics* to indicate an interest in forms of intimacy and relating that are erotic yet not sexual. Sexuality here is understood as “a system for categorizing desire . . . that invents normalcy and deviancy toward forwarding the interests of colonialism, whiteness, wealth, ability, and normality” (Przybylo 2019, 21), and nonsexual erotics is a concept of intimacy and relating that contravenes oppressive systems of heteronormativity and romantic love. I find *nonsexual* to be a useful way of referring to the queer friendships under analysis because the term lacks the associations with sexual identity and identity politics that *asexual* holds, and has the potential to encompass other nonsexual ways of being, such as singleness or celibacy (see Cobb 2012; Kahan 2013). At the same time, I do not consider nonsexual and asexual to be highly distinct or mutually exclusive categories, as many asexuality studies scholars have employed the latter to refer to a wide range of phenomena, intimacies, and erotics (see Przybylo 2019).

Using two crime novels set around college campuses that focus on close friendships as my case study, namely Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992) and Tana French’s *The Likeness* (2008), I consider the tension present in depicting these relationships as enriching, fulfilling, and seductive, while also criminally dangerous to the people involved as well as to other characters. Both novels offer stories of intense and erotic yet nonsexual friendships between college students, depicted as alternatives to forming romantic and sexual couples and families. The friendships occupy a central position in the lives of the characters, who hope to achieve complete freedom from external social and economic pressures by creating small utopian communities of like-minded people. Ultimately, this dream remains unfulfilled as the novels end in tragedy and destruction, in accordance

with the logic of maturation, compulsory sexuality, and amatonormativity, in which such friendships could only function as a phase on the way to a stable, romantic, and sexual relationship (Brake 2012; Gupta 2015; Halberstam 2005). Although little scholarly work has thus far been devoted to critiques of romantic love and aromanticism as an identity, I draw on the writings of yingchen and yingtong in their zine “An Aromantic Manifesto” and on Elizabeth Brake’s concept of amatonormativity, both of which question the centrality of romantic love and relationships to theorize the relationalities depicted in these novels (Brake 2012; yingchen and yingtong 2018). Brake’s amatonormativity points to the fact that romantic love not only occupies a privileged position in contemporary western culture and society, but that it is also considered the normal and natural ultimate life goal, an assertion that Brake finds limiting and oppressive (Brake 2012, 88–89). This article considers the allure of utopian friendship in the context of economic privilege and whiteness, which constitute the prevailing conditions for these alternative life paths to occur. In my exploration of what makes these intense yet nonsexual friendships thinkable and possible (at least up to a point), I am contributing to asexuality studies and aromantic studies, as well as to queer considerations of friendship, engaging with the possibilities of forming nonsexual and nonromantic forms of intimacy.

My choice of these two novels is guided by their focus on intimate friendships: the friendship paradigms in each novel are presented not only as uniquely intense and carrying an erotic charge, but also as central to the lives of the characters. Other popular literary examinations of friendship tend to depict same-sex friendships between two people or to present the lives of a group of friends through the years, with the friendships as an important and constant element yet not the central preoccupation of the characters, as is the case with the widely read and reviewed *The Interestings* by Meg Wolitzer (2014). Some other recent novels with a sensibility similar to *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* include *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara (2015) and the Neapolitan series by Elena Ferrante (2012), which are also invested in friendship as the *one plot* dominating the characters’ lives and which describe the emotional dimension of that relationship in sensual detail. A few factors make *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* the most fruitful point of departure for my own analysis: the centrality of friendship portrayed as a valid alternative to the *chrononormative* logic of maturation (Freeman 2010), their generic conventions, and the fact that the groups of friends are mixed-gender. In line with Jack Halberstam’s efforts to conceptualize queer lifestyles using cultural texts commonly assumed to be unworthy of academic attention, I employ *low theory* and attend to the narrative workings of crime as a genre to reveal the queer possibilities of friendship groups as depicted in these two novels (Halberstam 2011). My archive thus blends the presumed highness of theory produced by academics with popular texts such as crime novels and zines to bring together various iterations of queer life created to challenge hetero- and amatonormativity.

Drawing on the tropes and narrative logic of the crime genre, Tartt's and French's novels rely on heightened tension-building followed by an abrupt and intense climax, in which the utopian friend communities are destroyed and the status quo ante returns. With their focus on interpersonal relations and motives, socially and geographically distanced settings, and limited pools of suspects, *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* rely on the tradition of classic detective stories originally made popular by Agatha Christie (Knight 2003). Though romance plots are not traditionally an important element in such stories, they often end with a suggestion of a romantic *happily ever after* for a couple, once the crime has been solved and the guilty party punished (Knight 1980, 116). This legacy will prove crucial to my analysis of the endings of Tartt's and French's novels, in which the friendship groups are destroyed and the friends separate, unable to form any close emotional connections once the defining relationships of their lives have fallen apart. Thus, it is not so much the novels' literary value or their popularity that have determined my decision to focus on them (though they are certainly both good and widely read), but rather the fact that they make use of generic conventions of crime fiction to encapsulate the intense nonsexual sensibility of friendship as a way of life, which I consider particularly relevant to the asexual and queer theorizing of alternative relationalities (Foucault 1997a). Since neither of the novels has thus far been analyzed in this context, my article contributes to the literary scholarship of reading literature for asexual themes.

*The Secret History* is the more critically acclaimed and popular of the two books. Tartt has become an object of significant interest in literary circles due to the hype around her first novel, her low public profile, and her limited literary output coupled with enthusiastic reception of her three novels, published ten years apart: *The Secret History* was followed by *The Little Friend* in 2002, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Goldfinch* in 2013 (Adams 2013). Tartt's literary debut, considered a cult novel, was incredibly popular when it was released and remains so, having been translated into twenty-eight languages and sold over a million copies as of 2013 (Cwik 2013).<sup>1</sup> The scholarship on *The Secret History* considers it mainly in the context of its university setting (Kyriakidou 2018; Mills 2005), gothic elements (Truffin 2014), and classical themes (Pauw 1994), but the queer dimension of the friendship at the center of the book has not been a subject of literary consideration. This campus novel is set in a small Vermont college among a close-knit group of students of ancient Greek. The novel's narrator and protagonist, Richard, is a newcomer to the college and an outsider to the group at first; when he meets other members of the group, he is immediately fascinated: "they were magnificent creatures, such eyes, such hands, such looks. . . . I envied them, and found them attractive" (Tartt 1992, 32). Richard soon becomes part of this tight-knit community, whose obsession with ancient Greek and each other engender complete self-containment. Central to considering their relationships in the context of queerness and privilege, all of them are white and cisgender, and one—Francis—is a closeted gay man. The

intensity of affection the friends share and their inspiring plans for economic and social independence keep the reader's sympathy on their side, even as they turn to crime to keep the group intact. The very beginning of the novel makes it clear that one of the friends, Bunny, is killed by the others; thus, the book is not so much a *whodunit* but rather a *whydunit*, where the central mystery is the crisis that would lead a group of friends to kill one of their own.

*The Secret History* was an inspiration for Tana French, an American-Irish author whose series of crime novels is set in Ireland (Merritt 2014). Although French is a popular author, her writing has not received extensive literary criticism, perhaps due to the fact that it is dismissed merely as genre literature. At the same time, her Dublin Murder Squad series, of which *The Likeness* is the second part, has been appreciated both for its depiction of Irish society in the fallout of the 2000s economic crisis and its original take on the crime genre (Brissette 2018; Levy 2014; Miller 2016). *The Likeness* is a story of a detective who, due to a striking physical resemblance to a murder victim, is able to go undercover to investigate the woman's death. Cassie, the narrator, is seduced by the close-knit group of friends she joins impersonating Lexie, the murdered woman. They are graduate students of English literature who refuse to engage with the world outside, preferring their own company and the independence made possible by their parents' financial support. Demographically similar to each other and to Tartt's characters, they are also white and cisgender, though the one gay character, Justin, acknowledges his identity slightly more openly than Francis does in *The Secret Likeness*. So invested are they in the vision of a community of friends, free of the pressures of working for a living or forming nuclear family units, that Lexie is killed by one of the group members when she is considering leaving the group. Yet again, crime is the response to internal and external threats to the group's unity.

In what follows, I bring together queer theory and asexuality studies to analyze the erotic and utopian potential of the friendships depicted in these two novels. Although both novels' friendship groups ultimately fail under the dual pressure of heteronormativity's inescapable logic and the conventions of the crime genre, they offer a tantalizing glimpse into the heightened emotional lives of groups of people who find nonsexual fulfillment in one another. Within the narrative logic of both stories and in a manner typical of crime fiction, the characters are punished for their non-amatonormative desires, first through their involvement in crime and later by being rendered incapable of happiness after the friendships have ended. Yet the morals of punishment for transgression and return to status quo are undermined by the fact that the worlds and relationships depicted are so seductive for readers. This seductiveness is analyzed closely in the first section of this article, which discusses the nonsexual erotics of the friendships in question: the bodily, intellectual, and emotional pleasures on offer. The second section is a closer look at how the friendships are destroyed through nonsanctioned sexual activities and the pressure to move on to a more

mature phase in life built around couplehood; this crisis is revealed in the form of the criminal activities the characters take up to protect their communities. I take these novels as indicative of both the erotic pleasures inherent in close, intense friendships and the discomfort at the idea of creating such a lifestyle in place of romantic and sexual relationships that form the backbone of the late capitalist western system. As such, this analysis contributes to both asexual studies and queer studies in its exploration of forms of life alternatives to the nuclear family, maturation, and (re)productivity.

### The Pleasures of Close Friendships

“I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell” (Tartt 1992, 2). This striking opening to *The Secret History* mirrors the language of romantic love and fascination—the friendship becomes the story to tell, the one that determines the course of life for Richard and his friends forever. This fact in and of itself suggests that there is something unique about the status of the friendships described in *The Secret History* (and also *The Likeness*). The friendships are not depicted as mere complements to a life primarily structured around a romantic and sexual relationship and a job to support a family. Instead, both novels offer a glimpse into lives *built around* these friendships, with their intense fascinations that, while not sexual in nature, are nevertheless incredibly formative and deeply erotic in how they are experienced.

In her groundbreaking essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde offered a vision of life and pleasures that are erotic in a broader meaning of the word than simply sexual. Some of the erotic experiences Lorde described are personal (such as thinking through an idea or writing a poem), others communal (like sharing in joy or pursuits with other people) ([1984] 2007). Lorde noted the radical potential of these erotic pleasures to decenter the western logic that structures sexuality in sexological, exclusively genital terms and oppresses women. In Lorde’s view, being in touch with the erotic leads to “our acts against oppression [becoming] integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” ([1984] 2007, 89). As a result, these erotic pleasures have personal meaning, in that they help us experience a deep joy of being, but also a political meaning in providing strength to combat oppression. Lorde’s effort to redefine the erotic in ways that reject the focus on sexuality was later taken up by theorists who use the concept to further queer studies (Huffer 2013) and asexuality studies (Przybylo 2019), while scholars of Indigenous studies and critical race studies have created modes of relating to the world alternative to a white colonial settler logic of sexuality through concepts such as *Indigenous erotics* or *Sovereign Erotics* (Driskill 2004; Rifkin 2012). Through all of these interventions, Lorde’s concept of the erotic remains crucial to any efforts to think sensuality, sexuality, and relating otherwise.

In a similar vein, Lauren Berlant clarifies the urgency of rethinking intimacy beyond the typical narratives of coupledom, arguing that those who do not fit this model ("the queers, the single, the something else") become victims of the systems of oppression (2000, 6). The concept of erotics is a way to rethink intimacy that allows for a decentering of sexuality in favor of other attachments, pleasures, and ways of relating. The close friendships depicted in *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* are nothing short of attempts to "imagine lives that make more sense" for those excluded from the story of coupledom (Berlant 2000, 6). They can also be framed as the "creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships . . . through our sexual, ethical, and political choices," as Foucault would have it (1997b, 164). Foucault and Berlant, along with other queer and asexuality studies scholars invested in alternative ways of relating and experiencing intimacy, insist on the consciously political and ethical element of this project; they point out that building a life around friendships, polyamorous relationships, nonhierarchical and communal care, or singlehood can and should be considered an act of dissent from chrononormative life narratives (Berlant 2000; Berlant and Warner 2000; Foucault 1997a, 1997b; Przybylo 2019; yingcheng and yingtong 2018). I argue that the friendships in these novels serve a similar purpose: while anti-capitalism is much more explicit in *The Likeness*, the groups of friends from both novels actualize distinct anti-amatonomarative forms of intimacy and life-building centered around intimate, erotic friendships.

The list of activities that Lorde provides for understanding erotic pleasure, including building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea, and dancing, holds a striking similarity to the ways that the two novels describe erotic pleasure within the close groups of friends. Taking pleasure in one another's company, a deep understanding—bodily and emotional—that runs through each of the two groups, as well as the joy of setting up a house together are all described in passages suffused with a sense of enchantment. In *The Likeness*, the closeness has an almost supernatural quality to it:

The most important thing about these four: just how close they were. . . . It was like a shimmer in the air between them, like glittering web-fine threads tossed back and forth and in and out until every movement or word reverberated through the whole group: Rafe passing Abby her smokes almost before she glanced around for them, Daniel turning with his hands out ready to take the steak dish in the same second that Justin brought it through the door, sentences flicked onto each other like Snap cards with never a fraction of a pause . . . seamless (French 2008, 167).

The group barely needs to communicate out loud, they are so well-attuned that they anticipate each other's needs without words. Their closeness is built on common intellectual pursuits as they write and work together, discuss ideas for their graduate theses (in *The Likeness*) or the intricacies of Greek translations (in *The Secret History*). Much of the erotic charge comes from this seemingly

unlikely and rare feeling of community not only of souls, but also of minds that can understand each other perfectly. In that, the books capture the atmosphere typical of campus novels, in which the process of intellectual development, of finding passion and pleasure in pursuing newfound knowledge and being in the company of inspiring teachers, holds a central place to the plot and the journey of the main characters. What is unique here is the communal aspect of the feelings described and their erotic nature; there are no affairs between professors and students, nothing hierarchical.<sup>2</sup> The relationships are formed among five peers, and they require an illusion of democratic equality within the groups to function properly. Whereas the intellectual exchange is central, the intimacy between the characters seems to have a spiritual dimension to it, as though they function as one body, an organism that survives as long as the equilibrium is not affected.

The importance of sharing physical space and the sense of intimacy that begets appear in most descriptions of their interactions:

They were very tactile, all of them. We never touched in college, but at home, someone was always touching someone: Daniel's hand on Abby's head as he passed behind her chair, Rafe's arm on Justin's shoulder as they examined some spare-room discovery together, Abby lying back in the swing seat across my lap and Justin's, Rafe's ankles crossed over mine as we read by the fire. . . . [T]hey didn't have boundaries, not among themselves, not the way most people do (French, 234).

The nonsexual touching described by Cassie, the protagonist of *The Likeness*, is a central feature of the friendship, and as such can only be understood and appreciated by those who are part of it. Frank, Cassie's supervisor, can only make sense of it through the sexual framework of an orgy, whereas she sees the lack of physical boundaries as a way to create a relationship of emotional and bodily closeness, one "stranger and more powerful" than one built on sexual desire (French, 234). While not sexual, the tactile dimension of the relationship is essential to creating its intensity, because it makes the group akin to one organism, interdependent and impossible to separate without the need for violence. The friends are the only source of physical comfort and contact for one another—all other relationships constitute a threat to the group—so this type of nonsexual (but no less intense) touch is necessary for them to fulfill their sensual needs. The lack of boundaries has a physical element to it, but it also encompasses sharing a home and valuing emotional intimacy within the group over any other relationships.

As alluring as the groups are from within, they also hold an aura of mysterious beauty seductive to the narrators while they are still outsiders. In *The Likeness*, Cassie reflects on her memories of the group, stressing her attraction to them: "They were so beautiful. Rafe was the only one who could have been called good-looking; but still, when I remember them, that beauty is all I can

think of" (French, 164). In *The Secret History*, Richard remembers the moment he saw the group for the first time: "Four boys and a girl, they were nothing so unusual at a distance. At close range, though, they were an arresting party—at least to me, who had never seen anything like them, and to whom they suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities" (Tartt 1992, 17). These qualities, which in the course of the narrative lose some of their mystery—but never their appeal—frame the groups as unique and separate from the mundane surroundings. They draw in the narrators and the readers alike, encouraging them to become part of the community. Their beauty contributes to the fairy tale–like quality of both novels, in which the outsider is drawn into the orbit of mysterious groups of strangers who share deep secrets.

A significant part of this fascination and the sense of camaraderie is rooted in the demographic similarity of the characters—their socioeconomic position, but also their whiteness. The very title of *The Likeness* alludes to the uncanny physical resemblance between Cassie and Lexie, the murder victim she impersonates, but also to the comfort that members of that group find in their common interests and outlook on life. Much like in *The Secret History*, they share a relatively high social status, plans for pursuing academic careers, and a value system that leads them to prioritize the intimacy they find in their friendship over potential coupledom. Consequently, they can look at each other and see not only their closest friends, but also reflections of themselves. The narrators' focus on the beauty of their friends—which, as Cassie's quote above suggests, is not a purely physical quality but rather an ineffable aura around them—can also be linked to an aesthetic privileging of whiteness, feeding into a long history of associating whiteness with supreme beauty (Dyer 1997, 70–71; Painter 2010, 43–71). The protagonists' shared whiteness, their sameness, lends a narcissistic tinge to their mutual affection. Perhaps their ability to work together so well, to understand each other and to feel as if they are one body, is only enabled by their similarities.

The economic privileges shared by the characters are also a precondition for the lifestyle they imagine: spending a life together in a house inherited by a member of the group and devoting their time to intellectual pursuits rather than working for a living. In other words, this queer organization of life is only possible due to the fact that their basic financial needs are met by rich parents or thanks to inherited wealth. Rejection of a heteronormative lifestyle is entangled with the longing for economic independence when Richard describes their dreams for the future in *The Secret History*:

But even that day . . . it had the quality of a memory; there it was, before my eyes, and yet too beautiful to believe. . . . The idea of living there, of not having to go back ever again to asphalt and shopping malls and modular furniture; of living there with Charles and Camilla and Henry and Francis and maybe even Bunny; of no one marrying or going home or getting a job in a town

a thousand miles away or doing any of the traitorous things friends do after college; of everything remaining exactly as it was, that instant—the idea was so truly heavenly that I'm not sure I thought, even then, it could ever really happen, but I like to believe I did (Tartt, 113).

At the highest point of their friendship, Richard imagines a perfect future in which nothing would ever need to change. Instead, the whole group would remain eternally young, forever free of boring, middle-class preoccupations with earning money, supporting a family, or engaging in consumption. This vision is motivated by the enthralling quality of their current communal life, but it also requires the unacknowledged privilege of being able to afford such a life. The utopias of queer friendships in these novels, while exciting in their possibilities for imagining different ways of forming bonds and intimacy, are deeply entangled in the whiteness, economic privilege, and cultural and social capital of the characters, as evidenced by their treatment of outsiders. Even though not all of the characters are well-off—in fact, it is mainly Henry (*The Secret History*) and Daniel (*The Likeness*) who have access to a lot of money—they all clearly feel comfortable living the life of upper-class college students, even if at times it is lived on credit.

The cultural and social markers of class privilege are intermingled with whiteness, as whiteness allows them to lead the lives they choose without direct reproach from the outside. The characters are framed as eccentric but ultimately left alone in their strange habits rather than—as may have been the case if they were not protected by whiteness and class privilege—as a potentially dangerous criminal element that needs to be rooted out of the neighborhood. In considering the conditions of possibility of queer friendship utopias, the characters' economic position and whiteness mutually reinforce each other in ways that reflect the economic advantages accrued due to whiteness in American society (Lipsitz 2005). Whiteness equips them with a certain level of protection from police investigation, and in the case of *The Secret History* probably lets them get away with murder: in a drug- and ritual-induced daze, the group kills a local farmer, whose death is not investigated by the police; their security is only seriously threatened when they kill Bunny, someone of their own social class.

Economic privilege also enables them to opt out of the economic logic of capitalist life expectations—ownership of their respective houses in particular. The inherited houses occupy central positions in both novels, as safe havens from outside influence and sites of community-building for both groups of friends. This is where the groups spend time alone, engrossed in academic work and strengthening their bond. The houses are described as enthralling fortresses, luring the newcomers in: “The house was their trump card, their fondest treasure, and that weekend they revealed it to me slyly, by degrees—the dizzy little turret rooms, the high beamed attic, the old sleigh in the cellar, big enough to be pulled by four horses, astring with bells,” remembers Richard (Tartt, 88).

They serve as physical manifestations of the groups' hopes for the future: "And in the evenings there was the house. . . . [T]he four of them treated the house like some marvelous musical instrument, a Stradivarius or a Bosendorfer, that they had found in a long-lost treasure trove and were restoring with patient, enchanted, absolute love" (French, 233).

Most of their daily activities involve working in and around the house. In *The Likeness*, the house also stands for the absolute unity and loyalty of the group, as Daniel decides to share the ownership of it with his friends to ensure that they all have the same stake in their community. He realizes that this is the only route to financial independence and thus the ability to shape a life together, insisting that it "makes the difference between freedom and enslavement" (French, 503). This certainty confirms his awareness of economic constraints on their future, while at the same time revealing the privilege of the group as they can own the house only because of Daniel's inherited wealth, which stems from British colonization. The comparison of working for wages to enslavement indicates a strong political critique of the capitalist system and its limitations, while ignoring histories of racism that make a life of leisure and comfort possible. The connection (at least in Daniel's mind) between the economic aspect of their project of independence and the organization of his private and intimate life around friendship are thus founded on unexamined white privilege.

Owning a house is integral for both utopian friendship communities because it is one of the conditions of achieving complete independence, not only from expectations about the proper way of life, but also from the economic system at large. The characters of both novels want to spend their lives together, working in academia for intellectual satisfaction rather than money, without excessive and unnecessary consumption. This would allow them to focus on what they find truly valuable—each other—and to reject other people's expectations, perhaps to the point of never having to interact with outsiders at all. This fantasy is reminiscent of white colonial visions of autarky, fantasies of complete freedom from the interference of others, formed in opposition to ethics of interdependence characteristic of many nonwhite, Indigenous, and feminist modes of relating (Rose 1999; Braidotti 2013). It seems to be the case that such separation from the outside world is necessary to retain the purity of the friend groups in each novel, as any attempt to breach the cocoon and involve other people results in tragedy.

And tragedy is what happens when the local neighbors begin to harass the group in *The Likeness*, disturbing their delicate balance, and when the protagonists of *The Secret History* venture out of their enclave and kill a farmer while under the influence of drugs. In both stories, the groups' dreamt-of independence is eventually destroyed when the state apparatus invades their communities in the form of police investigations. The narrative suggests that a belief in creating a queer life based on denying the pressures to grow up into a reproductive family unit is not enough; in practice, a rejection of capitalist economy and

consumption is an equally crucial condition of their alternative modes of life succeeding. Thus, the longevity of the friendship groups is ultimately dependent on the belief in complete purity from external influences—a position possible only due to economic privilege.

The intensity and intimacy of the friendships in both novels are expressed in the language of the narrators and members of the groups, which employs phrasing typical of descriptions of romantic relationships. In *The Secret History*, Richard claims that what he and the others shared was love: “And if love is a thing held in common, I suppose we had that in common, too, though I realize that might sound odd in the light of the story I am about to tell” (Tartt, 7). Daniel, the leader of the group in *The Likeness*, expresses amazement at the luck involved in bringing the group together:

It always took my breath away . . . that the five of us could have found one another—against such odds. . . . [I]t would have been so heart-stoppingly easy for us to miss one another. . . . I used to imagine time folding over, the shades of our future selves slipping back to the crucial moments to tap each of us on the shoulder and whisper: Look, there, look! That man, that woman: they’re for you; that’s your life, your future, fidgeting in that line, dripping on the carpet, shuffling in that doorway. Don’t miss it (French, 529).

The language is full of wonder at the depth of their connection, but it also reflects the narrative of destiny, of meeting *the one*, that is typically associated with stories of romantic love rather than friendship. In these novels, the defining event in life is not meeting the one person who makes life complete, but rather having four soulmates to share a life with. Such descriptions of their relationships, suffused with fascination and the implied exclusion of all others, mirror the language of romance in problematic ways. Drawing on aromantic insight, these framings suggest not so much a queer rejection of the hierarchical and unjust mode of romance, but rather the transference of romantic feelings from one object (i.e., one life partner) to the group of friends, which functionally occupies the same jealously guarded and privileged position (yingcheng and yingtong 2018). The intensity of the feelings between them is the foundation on which the stories of these separatist little communities are built, but it also ultimately leads to murder in analogous efforts to protect the group.

The relational mode and concept of *queerplatonic*, used as an umbrella term for a variety of relationships “that involve some significant kind of intimacy that doesn’t fit well in the ‘romantic’ box [and] that don’t really fit the ‘friendship’ box properly” (Rotten Zucchinis 2014, 3), offers a possible alternative framework for understanding these relationships. This term, widely used in asexual and aromantic scholarship and activism, is meant to queer the hegemonic separation between romance and friendship and to decenter the hierarchy of relationships, in which sexual and romantic relationships occupy the highest position as a result of the investment in amatonormativity (Brake 2012; yingcheng and

yingtong 2018). Queerplatonic may certainly refer to the friendships depicted in *The Secret History* and *The Likeness*, as they include significant intimacies (and even, as I argued, erotics) and seem to be more intensely experienced than a typically understood friendship. At the same time, my preference would be to broaden the concept of friendship to include queer, intimate, intense friendships much like the ones in the novels, rather than to agree that these relationships “don’t . . . fit the ‘friendship’ box,” as theorists of queerplatonic relationships would argue (Rotten Zucchinis, 3). The long history of queer affinity to the idea of friendship—going back to romantic female friendships and lesbian separatist communities on the one hand, and to Foucault’s theorizations of friendship as a uniquely gay way of life on the other—seems to me a legacy worth following (Love 2009, 75–81). I find (queer) friendship to be a concept capacious enough to include intense, erotic, and exclusive intimacies that occupy a central position in life.

A certain suspicion of queer friendships, or close emotional and erotic yet non(hetero)sexual bonds, has become a common theme in western culture, especially when the policing of young women’s relationships is involved, since marriage is held as the privileged site for fulfilling all needs (Ingraham 2006, 212). Fears of same-sex friendships becoming so intense as to derail a young person’s *natural* development and life trajectory—one expected to end with a heterosexual reproductive marriage—abound in nineteenth-century accounts of romantic friendships (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012, 129; Vincipus 2004, xvi). A similar tension is noticeable in the recent popularity of novels about the dangerous influence of teenage female friends. In books such as *The Girls* by Emma Cline, based on the Manson family murders, or Megan Abbott’s thrillers, including *Dare Me* and *The Fever*, erotically charged friendships between young girls tend to be depicted as toxic, fueled by jealousies and unhealthy obsession. Rather than an outcome of individual faults of particular female characters or an *unnatural* intensity of their feelings for one another, as they are often framed, the conflicts should be considered a result of living under the conditions of patriarchy, with its attendant pressures and expectations regarding sexuality, beauty, and the perceived necessity for women to compete for scarce resources, men included. The friendships in *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* involve both men and women, but they are similarly described as inappropriately intense and unavoidably leading to tragedy for all involved.

And yet, looking at these friendships through a queer lens reveals a strong vein of utopian idealism. Not only are the members of each group happy to be together and to plan a common future, but the newcomers to the group are quickly convinced of the beauty and efficacy of this solution. These families of choice offer a queer alternative to the amatonormative life, one divorced from the logic of development and the pressure to join the (re)productive society. If, as Foucault argued, friendship can be a way of life that restructures our understanding of what type of life counts as meaningful, then “life can yield

a culture and an ethics" and the characters of these novels certainly aspire to the goal of reshaping relational cultures and ethics (1997a, 138).<sup>3</sup> The novels' friendships offer a seductive closeness and an erotic charge, but also freedom from patriarchy and limiting notions of monogamous, sexual, and romantic love.

Audre Lorde expressed a similar sentiment when she appreciated the erotic for allowing her to exist outside the major institutions that are typically used to make sense of life: "And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor an *afterlife*" ([1984] 2007, 89). For Lorde, as for the characters in these novels, the teleological logic that is assumed to lead to a well-established goal meant to retroactively imbue one's life with meaning—such as marriage, god, or afterlife—is a threat to the freedom of the erotic life she preferred.<sup>4</sup> These intense erotic friendships fulfill the emotional and practical needs of the characters involved, not only in the present, but presumably also into the future. As a result, the friends are able to carve out their own way of living, following many queers in rejecting reproductive futurity, capitalist productivity, and sexual exchange (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005; Fahs 2010). It is then a testament to the power of amatonormativity that the dreams of these communities must be destroyed so that social order, understood as full participation in romantic and sexual coupledom and in capitalist economy, may be resumed.

### Friendships in Danger

Despite the myriad of emotional and practical rewards described above, a life centered around a separatist friend group also carries a certain cost: "We knew, when we first decided to live here, that there would be sacrifices involved. We expected that," admits Daniel in *The Likeness* (311). One sacrifice implied in each novel is keeping a distance from others: in both novels, group dynamics and the strong personalities of the leaders prevent the friends from creating and sustaining relationships with their families of origin or any other potential acquaintances. For the groups to remain cohesive as the queerly erotic households discussed in the previous section, any major romantic and sexual entanglements must also be avoided, because they result in weakening the close bonds, which in both novels leads to crime and eventual destruction of the communities. These limitations signpost the major sources of conflict within the groups, but they also reflect narrative structures typical of classic detective stories, in which both the motive of the crime and the case's ultimate solution are rooted in tensions within a small community (Knight 2003).

The friend groups share space with communities in which they are neither involved nor interested. In *The Secret History*, the outsiders include other college students, but even more importantly the "townies," who are generally cut off from the life of the college and regard students as intruders. The one major encounter

between the friends and inhabitants of the town illustrates the unusual relationship between the two groups as it propels the plot of the book and yet remains strangely marginal. Their first victim is not Bunny, one of their own, but rather an unnamed farmer, killed when the friends are performing a ritual under the influence of drugs. Bunny is only killed because he finds out and threatens to reveal the secret. Whereas Bunny's murder is significant enough to warrant a police investigation and causes the group itself to fall apart under pressure of recriminations and remorse, the farmer's death is written off as an accident and does not really bother the characters much. This dismissal highlights just how little thought they give to people they do not perceive as equal, and functions as the most glaring example of their class and race privilege when they do not become suspects in the initial police investigation.

The relations between the main characters of *The Likeness* and their neighbors never turn murderous, but they hold a great deal of tension as well. Set in Ireland at the time of economic crisis of the 2000s, the novel reflects conflicts about the use of land between upper-class inhabitants of the manor house, inherited by Daniel, and the people living in the nearby village.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with feudal law, Daniel's ancestors used to have economic and legal control over the village, which was seen as their prerogative and responsibility. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the book is set, historical tensions erupt when the villagers express their antipathy toward the college students living in the "manor" through vandalism and graffiti. It turns out that they are not merely venting their frustration about economic inequality, but trying to force Daniel and his friends out so that luxury apartments can be built in place of the house. This investment would reinvigorate the local economy, but the picturesque house that holds the promise of economic independence for Daniel and his friends would have to be sacrificed. This conflict reflects tensions between settler colonizers, previously embodied by the upper-class British aristocracy and now by the college students, and the local Irish population.<sup>6</sup> The settlers' economic power over the village is obscured under the guise of respect for the historical value of the site, which allows the group of friends to reduce the local people and the potential investors to greed-driven villains and cast themselves as heroes.

For the friendship communities in the novels to work as they do, they need internal cohesion, or at least a successful illusion thereof. When some members of the groups form more intimate bonds as couples, it is seen by others as a threat to the status quo because it destroys the seemingly democratic and egalitarian nature of the friendships, thus putting the intensity of their shared affect in danger. Consequently, sex and romance, while present, are never discussed openly, following the implicit rules seemingly agreed upon by all the friends, but in fact perhaps imposed by the two leaders, Henry in *The Secret History* and Daniel in *The Likeness*. In *The Secret History*, cracks in the monolith of the friendship appear when two members of the group, Camilla and Henry,

begin a relationship and—to a lesser extent—when Richard expresses love for Camilla. Romantic interest in Camilla is a particular threat to her twin brother, Charles, because of an incestuous relationship they had been having. A similar mechanism can be observed in *The Likeness*, where Daniel and Abby start a relationship. Such couplings make the two people more focused on one another to the exclusion of the other members of the groups, creating jealousies and feelings of inequality.

Even though romantic love can constitute a threat, the friend groups as depicted in the novels have a significant ability to withstand casual, mostly unacknowledged sexual encounters. In this way, sex itself is not actually the threat to their relationship, but rather sex coupled with emotional, exclusive involvement. In classic detective fiction, sex does not typically play a prominent role, even if love is one of the key motivations for crime. At the same time, as Gill Plain points out, “[g]ender transgression and the disruption of ‘normative’ sexuality have always been an integral part of the crime narrative” (2001, 6), which in the more conservative examples of the genre may have resulted in the sexually transgressive characters being reduced to the role of a victim, or a perverse criminal. However, queer sexuality functions differently in the novels by French and Tartt: it is not stigmatized or punished by the characters as long as it does not constitute a threat to the central friendships. In both novels, some characters sleep together occasionally, and the two gay characters—Francis in *The Secret History* and Justin in *The Likeness*—often participate in these casual sexual encounters. The sex that takes place among the friends is often nonnormative, since it includes relations between Francis or Justin and other characters who are happy to have same-sex encounters with them yet unwilling to be open about it, as well as the incestuous coupling of Charles and Camilla. The fact that some of the friends have occasional sex is treated as a form of private entertainment that allows the characters to let off steam, but it is never really publicly acknowledged, as doing so would presumably make these relations more serious and thus potentially threatening to the friendship group. This is where the fact that these groups are mixed-gender becomes especially significant: whereas in previous articulations of the queer potentials of friendship it was typically assumed to be a relationship of people of the same gender (Faderman 1981; Foucault 1997a), here the queer friendships include both men and women—framed by the novels within a binary understanding of gender—yet they are no less queer as a result. In each of the books, a majority of the sexual entanglements between friends, both consummated and not, seems to revolve around the two gay characters. Due to the centrality of gay desire, coupled with the heightened erotic tension between all members of the groups, I see these books as representing sexual fluidity and the multidirectional flow of desires and pleasures.

Ultimately, it is the heterosexual pairings that prove more threatening to the friendships because they open up a more obvious route toward leaving the

group through forming a stable, monogamous relationship. When Henry and Camilla become lovers in *The Secret History*, or Daniel and Abby in *The Likeness*, they deny the unspoken agreement to avoid romantic relationships that has previously held the group together. In a typical detective story, the reader may expect that the crime would be solved and the novels would finish on a happy note, with the two couples starting a new life together away from the trauma of the oppressive friendships and the murders that took place. Not in either of these two stories, however: by choosing to sacrifice themselves to save their friends, leaders Henry and Daniel prove that their primary emotional investment was in the friendship group rather than any heterosexual relationship. The novels both end tragically, with the two leaders dead, most other characters unhappy and adrift from each other, and only one seemingly happy couple—Cassie, the detective who had invaded the group in *The Likeness* to investigate them, with her police officer fiancé. The queer friendships that formed the center of each novel are destroyed, hence in these unusual crime novels, a heterosexual couple at the end spells tragedy in the form of the eradication of the central relationships rather than a safe return to the status quo.

The lack of a resolution built around a happy couple involves a racial element as well. In the two novels, white characters reject compulsory sexuality to pursue alternative lifestyles built around nonsexual ways of relating in the form of their friendships. Yet in accordance with the racist logic of white supremacy, white subjects rejecting reproductive futurity constitute a significant fissure in the sexual norm, as their nonsexuality signifies a *wasted opportunity* for continuing whiteness.<sup>7</sup> Przybylo underscores this logic by applying the theories of Ianna Hawkins Owen and Julian Carter to the white asexual couple, who are perceived by society and the mainstream as “wast[ing] the productive potential of [their] bod[ies] as a vector for the transmission of whiteness to the next generation” by not engaging in sex, sexual reproduction, and sexual desire” (Carter 2007, 55, quoted in Przybylo 2019, 22; Owen 2014). For this reason, asexuality is overwhelmingly represented as a curable problem of white people, who can overcome it to “pursue idealized white sexuality on the terms of whiteness—potent and desiring but restrained and ultimately transcendent” (Owen 2014, 130). The friend groups in *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* embody this anxiety about the wasted potential of whiteness: they reject the expectations and duties placed on them by society and refuse to form families or reproduce; instead, they find fulfillment only in the nonsexual communities. The sense of unease about such choices is reflected in the tragic endings of both books, which find all the characters unhappy, thus underscoring the price they paid for their friendships: the experience has rendered them *barren*, unable to form any meaningful relationships or participate in social life. The grief experienced by the reader stems from a mourning for a queer utopia gone astray, but perhaps also—less comfortably—a mourning for beautiful, shining, white friendships left unfulfilled.

What ultimately turns out to be the greatest threat to the groups in both novels is the inexorable pressure and expectation to grow up and move on that they experience from outsiders: their families and later the police. Although the friends conceive of their utopian communities as permanent, the logic of maturation encroaches on them. Daniel expresses these expectations along with the impossibility of any romantic relationships thusly:

The real price . . . I suppose some people might call it a state of suspended animation. . . . Although I would consider it a highly simplistic definition. Marriage and children, for example, were no longer possibilities for any of us. . . . And, although I won't deny that there have been elements of intimacy among us, for any two of us to enter into a serious romance would almost definitely have damaged our balance beyond repair. . . . We had to forfeit everything that Rafe's father would call the real world (French, 509, 510).

He and the others are aware of the tradeoffs, as discussed above. They know that any serious relationships would turn out to be destructive to their created utopia. They feel the judgement of their families, and later also the police, once the law gets involved. And yet it is clear that the cost is not really prohibitive from the characters' point of view; it is others who would refer to this choice as "suspended animation" or leaving the "real world" (French, 509, 510). Daniel notes the limitations of this definition of a happy and fulfilling life and confirms his belief in the alternative they created.

In this way, the novels offer a perfect representation of *growing sideways* as proposed by Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) or *queer time* as conceived by Jack Halberstam (2005). Finding themselves unable or unwilling to follow the taken-for-granted stages of life, with marriage, children, and a stable job, queer people have been carving out alternative life paths, "[leaving] the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (Halberstam 2005, 6). According to Halberstam, this queer notion of time became especially pertinent during the HIV/AIDS crisis, which revealed the impossibility of a reproductive future for many queer people affected by the illness, while at the same time making alternative forms of kinship and support, including friendships, central to the survival of individuals and the community (2005, 2). These alternative life paths do not necessarily flow according to the logic of personal, social, and economic development and maturation, from childhood to adolescence and finally adulthood, with all the expected milestones of couplehood, marriage, and reproduction along the way. Queer *ways of life*, such as being single, having queerplatonic relationships, or building close friendship groups, are not a consolation prize in case the *real deal* (i.e., marriage with children) is impossible, but rather a valid alternative. Of course, the changing political and legal situation of LGBTQ2IA+ communities in the United States and other western countries—especially the legalization of same sex marriage—means that for at least some members of the community, certain elements of

the homonormative lifestyle remain desired and have become available. What is seen by some as an unquestionable gain, others criticize for privileging the perspective and needs of white, middle-class people (Conrad 2014; Warner 1999).

In addition to offering support and legitimacy in a world that still marginalizes and excludes many queer experiences, queer temporalities that challenge “straight time” also serves an important role in broadening the scope of what is deemed imaginable and achievable (Muñoz 2009). As Halberstam stresses, “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (Halberstam 2005, 2). Only when such alternative futures become thinkable can queerness as a utopian futurity be imagined and realized. José Esteban Muñoz elaborates on the necessity for queer futurities: “The here and now is simply not enough. Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough” (2009, 97). The friend groups in *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* offer representations of attempts to resist the prescribed romantic, sexual, and capitalist lifestyle that is deemed insufficient by the characters and instead to create a communal way of being built on nonsexual erotics.

And yet, within the narrative logic of these novels, these efforts prove unsuccessful in the end because the groups fall apart. Perhaps this is not a surprise since, as Foucault notes, relationships and intimacies unsupported by the state and its institutions “are much more fragile and vulnerable” even as they are also “often much richer, more interesting and creative than the others” (1997b, 172). Foucault’s statement is also reflected in what is imaginable and depictable in fiction. The utopian future built on queer friendship imagined in these novels is not achieved despite the intensity of the characters’ queer desire for alternative queer life paths and temporalities and their single-minded focus on one another. The friendships eventually shatter when the friends in each case kill one of their own to protect the integrity of the group. Whereas Bunny in *The Secret History* is a danger because he knows of a crime the group committed and is willing to reveal the secret to authorities, Lexie in *The Likeness* poses a problem of a different kind: she is killed because she decides to leave her friends upon learning that she is pregnant. Lexie wants to start a new life by having the baby, and in doing so, she is represented as deciding to follow the path of reproductive futurity. It remains unclear why she does not consider bringing the child up in the friend group—a possibility that would seem to fit their own project of an alternative family. Perhaps it is because such a shift in the relationships would be unsupportable for the group, or because French was not willing to commit to such a radically queer vision of family. After Lexie is killed and Cassie takes her place in an effort to investigate the murder, the latter also contributes to the destruction of this community: “What Lexie had

started, I had finished for her. Between the two of us, we had razed Whitethorn House to rubble and smoking ash" (French, 651). This moment reflects Cassie's ambivalence about the outcome of the investigation and the sense of intimacy between her and Lexie, created across time without any direct communication. Cassie leaves, having solved the crime, and gets engaged to her police officer boyfriend, whom she had mixed feelings about throughout the novel. The story's ending clearly suggests that the friendships shared within the group were abnormal and inherently rotten, whereas a future involving marriage offers solace after the trauma Cassie had experienced in this group.

This insistence on returning to the status quo is of course typical of crime novels. The very point of crime narratives and a substantial amount of the pleasure taken in consuming them lies in the fixing of the disturbance to the social order and the punishment of the crime, which is ultimately what makes crime a conservative genre (Porter 1981). At the same time, Gill Plain notes that though the ending of a crime narrative might be aimed at such "resolution and restoration," the genre is in fact filled with transgressive potential that constitutes a key part of the narrative before the closure of the ending (2001, 6). This observation fits the novels in this investigation perfectly: while the friendship groups do not survive in the end, suggesting that the desire for a queer community (instead of for heterosexual romantic coupling) is punished, throughout the books the transgressive queer potential is not only present, but its appeal is arguably the highlight of the stories. As such, *The Likeness* and *The Secret History* illustrate the inherent tension in crime narratives: although transgressions need to be punished and threats to the social life removed in the end, the very pleasure of the genre lies precisely in the excitement of the sins committed along the way.

Tartt's and French's novels also draw on the rubrics of crime fiction by relying on unreliable narrators, who are emotionally invested in the groups involved in the crimes. Employing an unreliable narrator in crime fiction has been interpreted as a reflection of "the central fear articulated in Golden Age fiction: that the threat of social disruption comes from within" (Scaggs 2005, 46). Indeed, in the case of *The Secret History* and *The Likeness*, the threat literally comes from within, as it is the friends who kill one of their own to protect the integrity of the group. The narrative tension in both novels is rooted in the suggestion of toxic conflict at the core of the groups. The reader is left with the question: is this *not* somehow inherent to the type of relationship they have, or is it a result of their frustrated utopia? In other words, is it the purportedly unnatural intensity of these erotic friendships that makes them prone to crime and violence, or is it the impossibility of creating this kind of life in a hetero- and amatonormative world that leads the characters to take such desperate measures?

It seems that the oppressive bounds of heteronormative, capitalist systems and expectations, along with the conventions of crime as a genre, work together toward the inevitable endings in which alternative families are broken and their

members supposedly return to society, but in fact end up adrift. My own reading of the novels is suffused with fascination for these friendships and informed by the queer hopes located in their utopian potentials. The insularity of the friendship groups represented creates problems from the very beginning, yet it is hardly possible not to be seduced by the intensity of affect shared by the characters. The two characters who work most actively to cover up the crimes committed by the group members—the leaders, Henry and Daniel—are also the ones most deeply committed to these communities and also possibly the ones least equipped to create meaningful lives outside the groups. They both die in the climactic scenes of the novels, leaving others to try to piece their lives back together. Through their deaths, Henry and Daniel take responsibility for their crimes and exonerate everyone else, making the final sacrifice for the good of their friends. At the end of *The Secret History* and *The Likeness*, the narrators see other members of the group again and discover them disillusioned and unhappily living in “the real world.” Cassie is the only one who manages to escape unhappiness, perhaps because she was never fully a part of the group and spent less time with them. Consequently, the suggestion seems to be that this formative experience of intense, deep, erotic friendship ruined the characters for all other kinds of attachments. Their lives would never be as exciting, as full, as they had been in that friendship group. This is exactly the sentiment Richard expresses when he claims: “This is the only story I will ever be able to tell” (Tartt 1992, 2). They all find it quite impossible to tell—or live through—any other story, having invested everything in these particular relationships.

## Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have argued that *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* constitute exciting depictions of alternative queer lifestyles and build around nonsexual erotics and friendship as a way of life, independent of constraining expectations of reproductive futurity and romantic and sexual bonds. These utopias are only sustainable temporarily and due to the economic and racial privilege of the subjects involved; ultimately, the communities represented are destroyed through a combination of romantic and sexual entanglements threatening the group’s stability, external pressures prompting some group members to leave, and criminal activities undertaken in efforts to protect the friendships. The utopian potential of the friendships is also limited by the rubrics of the crime novel in which difference is represented as aberration in need of elimination and romantic love is often victorious. In line with queer theory’s and asexuality studies’ investments in imagining intimacies, relationships, and temporality otherwise, the novels represent aromantically queer lifestyles in uniquely appealing ways, even if they eventually break down under the pressures of compulsory

sexuality and capitalism. I would like to end the article by thinking through the affective investments of the readers, and more specifically, through the question of how readers' sympathies are directed in the narratives. Are we to be relieved when the crimes are discovered and punished, and the friend groups wrecked as a result? Or are we disappointed that the utopian projects fail?

Personally, I certainly fall into the latter camp, having found myself emotionally invested in the well-being of the groups. In thinking through this particular reader response, I must interrogate my own position and the pleasure I took from the books. The fantasy depicted in them is familiar to me, as a young academic uninterested in forming a romantic and sexual relationship and reliant on intimate friendships for emotional and intellectual sustenance. Sharing a house with my friends, free of the necessity to work for a living and the expectation to find a life partner, spending time together (albeit perhaps with more Netflix and less classic English literature)—this is a dream I am more than happy to share with the characters crafted by Donna Tartt and Tana French. It is also undoubtedly true that I share some of their demographic characteristics and privileges that make such a life feel like a possibility.

The appeal of Tartt's and French's friendship groups also hinges on whether a reader perceives them as a worthy and exciting alternative to an amatonormative life narrative, or sees the tragic endings as inevitable consequences of the supposedly unnatural closeness of the friend groups or justified punishment for their criminal transgressions. The nonsexual erotic attachments formed in these groups can be considered transgressive and oppositional, as Lorde imagined in her explication of the erotics, only insomuch as they offer a way out of capitalist narratives of *a good life* through a community based on friendship. The characters are far from politically engaged in a broader sense, or on behalf of anyone other than themselves (Berlant 2011). Considering the fact that the characters embody upper-class privilege, it seems that giving the authors credit for representing queer visions of relating beyond the hetero- and amatonormative life narrative may be a bit excessive. Yet what is of particular interest for a consideration of nonsexual erotics is the tension created through offering a glimpse of fulfilling, erotic friend communities and then ultimately punishing the characters in the narrative turn of returning to the status quo typical of crime novels. Despite the conservative endings, the depiction of these friendships as an appealing alternative lifestyle is satisfying to those of us who do not expect to become part of a coupled, amatonormative unit and are frustrated with feeling invisible. As an answer to Foucault's call for friendship as a way of life and an effort to look for nonsexual ways of relating, Tana French's *The Likeness* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* offer an image that is not commonly seen in western representations, and may open up new avenues of thinking about intimacy, erotics, and amato-queer life possibilities.

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### Notes

1. Some examples of reviews and popular articles about *The Secret History*, both at the time of release and after, include Michiko Kakutani's review from 1992 and John Mullan's listicle of "reasons why we love" the book (Kakutani 1992; Mullan 2013). When Tartt's *The Goldfinch* was released in 2013, a number of articles were published about her work in general and her debut in particular.

2. *The Secret History* and *The Likeness* could be analyzed more extensively as somewhat atypical examples of campus novels, but that critical approach is beyond the scope of this particular article. For more on the appeal of the campus novel, its characteristics, and stock characters, see Scott (2004).

3. In this interview, Foucault focused on gay men and argued for the importance of friendship, but also specifically gay male relations, as a "way of life." Nevertheless, his remarks can and have been used by other critics to argue for the queer potential of friendship (Love 2007, 76).

4. Importantly, marriage as an institution has held vastly different meanings for people in the United States depending on their race, especially for women. While it was seen as an oppressive institution for white women with some economic privilege (because they lost their legal standing and rights to their property once married, but ostensibly gained economic security via their husbands), Black women, banned from marriage as an institution granting public and private rights and protections by slavery, saw getting married as an act of individual and collective agency (Kent 2003, 21–22; Przybylo 2019, 43–44).

5. In fact, houses occupy a central place in most of Tana French's novels, in which she deals with the consequences of the 2007–2008 economic crisis (linked to the housing market), upward and downward economic mobility of her characters, and anxieties about owning houses and land.

6. The ethnic-, religious-, and class-based imbalance of power that has historically structured relations between the British and the Irish in the settler colonial context also has a racial layer, as evidenced by the fact that the British (and later the Americans) used supposed racial differences as the basis for discriminating against the Irish

(Painter 2010, ch. 9; Dyer 1997, 52). At the same time, the conflict in *The Likeness* is a direct outcome of differences in class and social and cultural capital (i.e., economically vulnerable and lower-class locals versus educated, landowning graduate students) rather than race. Although a detailed analysis of the construction of whiteness in the New England context of *The Secret History* and the Irish context of *The Likeness* is beyond the scope of this text, I see the characters' whiteness as meaningful insofar as it contributes to and intertwines with their economic and social position, which—taken together—make their utopian communities possible (at least up to a point) and protect them from external intervention and the consequences of their actions.

7. The narrative of *race suicide*, supposedly committed by white people who refuse to reproduce, is closely tied to the ideology of eugenics and racist anxieties over the prospect of white people becoming an ethnic minority (Dyer 1997, 27; Kline 2005).

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